

WASHINGTON – U.S. Rep. Harry E. Mitchell led bipartisan passage of the 21st Century GI Bill today that will increase education benefits for our veterans, strengthen the economy, and enhance military recruitment. The House divided the the Supplemental Appropriations package into two separate parts. The first piece of the package funds the war in Iraq and Afghanistan through next summer, and passed 268-155. The second consisted of a number of domestic spending measures, including the Webb-Mitchell GI Bill and passed 416-12.

“When men and woman return from service it is our turn to take care of them,” said Mitchell, who teamed with Senator Jim Webb of Virginia as the bill’s primary sponsor. “The new GI Bill will provide veterans with a greater chance of success as they transition back into society.”

Today the White House endorsed the GI Bill saying, “We urge both the House and Senate to immediately pass this bipartisan agreement.” [Source, White House Press Release
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"This is an agreement that has been worked out in a bipartisan way that I think is acceptable to both most Democrats and most Republicans and to the White House," House Minority Leader John Boehner (R-OH) said. [Associated Press, Wednesday June 18, 2008]

“After World War II, the original GI Bill gave our returning veterans a strong foothold in the economy and served as the foundation for what became known as The Greatest Generation,” Mitchell said. “With the 21st Century GI Bill, we are giving our exceptional men and women service members the chance to become the next Greatest Generation.”

Mitchell introduced H.R. 5740, the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act, in April. It has 303 in the House, including 208 Democrats and 95 Republicans. The Senate companion bill, S. 22, which was introduced by U.S. Sen. Jim Webb of Virginia, has 58 Senate cosponsors.

The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act extends educational benefits to all members of the military who have served on active duty since September 11, 2001, including activated reservists and National Guard. Mitchell introduced the legislation with U.S. Reps. Bobby Scott (D-Va.), Ginny Brown-Waite (R-Fla.), and Peter King (R-N.Y.).

Under the legislation,

- Service members returning from Iraq or Afghanistan would receive up to four academic years of education benefits, including stipends for housing and books.
- Veterans would have up to 15 years after they leave active duty to use their education benefits.
- Veterans would be able to use the Yellow Ribbon G.I. Education Enhancement Program,

in which the federal government will match, dollar for dollar, any voluntary additional contributions to veterans from institutions whose tuition is more expensive than the maximum educational assistance provided under the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill.

Today, Mitchell made the following statement regarding the GI Bill:

Madam Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 5740, the Post 9/11 Veterans Education Assistance Act – bipartisan legislation that honors our men and women in uniform and strengthens our military.

I am pleased that this bill was included as part of the emergency war funding measure that the House is considering today because I believe taking care of those who serve in war is a cost of war. America should never fight wars without taking care of our own.

Since World War II, our nation has offered education benefits to returning GIs. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, the first GI Bill, which was passed unanimously by this House, paid for the tuition, books, fees, training costs, and even a monthly stipend for our returning veterans.

After World War II, nearly 8 million veterans, out of a wartime veteran population of 15 million, used the original GI Bill to earn an education. The economic return was unprecedented. For every dollar we spent on the GI Bill, we generated seven more into our national economy. Millions of newly-educated veterans led our nation in business and innovation and created the American middle class. It's no wonder the GI Bill of 1944 is regarded as one of the most successful pieces of legislation to earn this House's approval in the 20th Century.

Since that time, Congress has passed other GI bills, but over time, the value of the education benefit has declined. The current Montgomery GI Bill, for example, was designed for peacetime service, and is not meeting the needs of our newest generation of veterans, many of whom are returning from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Our veterans – whether active duty, Reservists or National Guardsmen – deserve an education benefit that accounts for the stress of war and keeps up with the rapidly increasing cost of a higher education. That is why, with the backing of a broad, bipartisan coalition, I introduced H.R. 5740, the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act.

Under the legislation, GIs returning from Iraq or Afghanistan would receive up to four academic years of education benefits, including stipends for housing and books. They can even use their benefits at private schools through the Yellow Ribbon G.I. Education Enhancement Program, in which the federal government will match, dollar for dollar, any voluntary additional contributions to veterans from institutions whose tuition is more expensive than the maximum educational assistance provided under this legislation.

Veterans would even have up to 15 years after they leave active duty to use their education benefits.

When I was elected to this House, my constituents asked me to work in a bipartisan way to find reasonable solutions to our common problems. And I think we achieved that with this bill.

Working together with my Democratic and Republican colleagues, we attracted more than

two-thirds of the House as cosponsors. Ninety-five Republicans, nearly half of the minority party's membership, lent their support.

I am happy that House leadership was able to build on this support and work with the President to come to a bipartisan agreement to provide this robust educational benefit to our veterans.

I encourage the Senate to act quickly to pass this new GI Bill and make good on our promise of a higher education.

Our veterans have fought for us. The least we can do is fight for them.